

TIMBUKTU

Timbuktu (Tomboutou), a former commercial/trade town and center of Islamic learning, lies in central Mali, on the southern edge of the Sahara. It is situated 11 kilometers from the Niger River and was at one time connected with the Niger by a canal (now dry).

Tuareg nomads probably founded the city in the late 11th century AD. The word “Timbuktu” means “the well of Bouctou” (*tin Bouctou*). Local historians claim that the city was originally a watering point on the trade routes leading to North Africa. They tell of a Tuareg slave woman, Bouctou, who was sent to guard a well located near the present day Timbuktu.

By the early 14th century, when it was incorporated into the empire of Mali--which included the former Kingdom of Ghana and the Songhai empire--Timbuktu was an important terminus of the trans-Saharan trade caravans (gold and salt), and was a trade distribution point along the upper Niger. It was during this period that Islam began to thrive in Timbuktu. Around 1324, the Malian king Mansa converted to Islam, which eventually penetrated the elaborate court life of the Malian Empire.¹ In the following decades, however, court intrigue and a succession disputes sapped the strength of the extended empire. In the early 15th century, the northern towns and provinces revolted, resulting in the formation of the powerful Songhai Empire.

In 1468, the Songhai ruler Sunni Ali Ber drove the Tuaregs out of Timbuktu, during an empire building campaign that also crippled the resistance of the non-Islamic Mossi and Dogon peoples to south of Timbuktu.² After the Songhai Empire conquered it, Timbuktu reached its zenith as a commercial and religious center. It had a population of about 40,000 in the early 16th century. Merchants from northern African cities traded salt and cloth for gold and for black African slaves in the markets of Timbuktu. The university organized at the city's Sankoré mosque was staffed by scholars educated in the leading Islamic academies of the Middle East.

In 1591 invaders from Morocco captured Timbuktu, and thereafter the city declined, partly because of raids by Bambara, Fulani, and Tuareg and partly because commerce was diverted to other cities.

In 1826 Ahmadi, the fanatical Muslim ruler of the Fulani Macina kingdom conducted a *jihad* (holy war) against the Tuaregs, and managed to capture the city. In 1863, Ahmadi was killed by El Hadj Umar, another Fulani leader, who subsequently took Timbuktu. However, the Tuaregs mounted violent revolts against the Fulani and succeeded in re-taking the city in 1864.

By the 19th century Timbuktu was of little importance. It was later occupied (1893-94) by the French, and was under French administration until 1960, when the present-day Mali became an independent state.

Today, Timbuktu is the regional capital of Mali's 6th geographic region, one of Mali's poorest regions. The population of the Tomboutou region is around 500,000 and there are an estimated 30,000 inhabitants in the city of Timbuktu. During the 1970's and 80's the region suffered from devastating droughts and from 1991 to 1995 was one of the centers of the Tuareg rebellion. The combined effect of these tragedies was the displacement of tens of thousands of Tuaregs and a virtual decimation of most economic activities in the region, e.g., livestock and trade.

From 1996 through 1998, Timbuktu was a center of relief and refugee-resettlement activities by various international aid agencies, e.g., UNHCR, and in 1998, international and bilateral donors began to shift their relief efforts to sustainable development activities.

¹ Islam largely remained a court and urban religion in the Malian Empire. Many of the rural residents were converted to Islam in the 17th to 19th centuries.

² Sunni Ali, though technically a Muslim, ruled as an African magician-king and at times ruthlessly persecuted Muslim scholars, who he perceived as a potential threat to his authority.